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A put-on for the pollsters

What with the Iran-Contra hearings and all, a weary phrase has come back into currency: "lying to the American people."

Politicians intone this phrase with blazing eyes, flaring nostrils and quivering jowls. A man who thinks nothing of lying to his wife, to the 9th Congressional District of Delaware or to the entire state of Montana will vibrate in horror at the idea of lying to all 240 million of us at the same time. You get the feeling that lying to the French people, or the Turkish people, or the Australian people wouldn't be quite so serious. But lying to the American people!

Well, I'm sorry. I just can't see it. For one thing, the American people themselves lie like hell.

I know, because they've just done it again. They lied to the latest New York Times/CBS News poll.

As Gary Hart — you do remember Gary Hart? — went down in flames, the pollsters asked us, the American people, if we'd vote against a man because he had committed adultery, and we lied through our teeth. We said no.

Most of us said we regarded adultery as less serious than lying about one's war record, cheating on taxes, being hospitalized for psychiatric reasons, or using cocaine. Anyone who believed that would probably believe Lee Hart, or should I say Lee Hartpence, when she said, "Gary wouldn't lie."

We ought to be ashamed of ourselves. We also told those poor gullible pollsters that we regarded marital infidelity as the least important of the derelictions they asked us to rate. We ranked it right down there with drunk driving.

True, a drunk driving arrest wouldn't do a candidate any good. But it also wouldn't dominate the front pages, the evening news, the covers of "Time," "Newsweek," "U.S. News" and "People," and Johnny Carson's monologue for a week.

I've always said the American people should take the media with a grain of salt. It's only fair to add that the media should take the American people with a grain of salt, too. They'd go broke trying to sell us 20 million magazines about a DWI charge.

Lots of politicians have driven while intoxicated and lived to tell about it, even when their companions didn't. And if they've sometimes lied to the American people afterward, well, the American people have proved to be understanding. After all, we lie to each other, too.

What do we have to hide? You name it: adultery, war records, taxes, cocaine, psychiatric confinement, drunk driving — things like that. I've always wondered who makes all the nation's obscene phone calls and writes all the dirty graffiti in restrooms, since nobody ever admits to any of it. The politicians can't be doing it all.

But why lie to the pollsters? After all, they don't make reprisals. The answer is probably that we react to pollsters the way we reacted to high-school English grammar tests: We say what we think is expected of us, even if it's not the way we talk among friends.

Yes, polls are technically private, but when we respond to them we feel obliged to act "public." Historian John Lukacs cautions us to distinguish between "public opinion" in this sense and "popular sentiment" — the way we express ourselves when we don't feel we're being monitored by a Higher Power.

The Hart case brings home the difference. We may impersonate civic-minded good taste on appropriate occasions, but sex really lights up the switchboards of personal interest. There was a time when young men felt obliged to say they read "Playboy" for the articles, but Hugh Hefner had enough sense not to bank on it. Gary Hart, caught in flagrante, tried to tell us he was just reading the articles, and a nation guffawed.

Hypocrisy requires some finesse. Its subtleties are worth tracing. In

times of official virtue, we feign virtue. But in the era of the "new morality," we feign tolerance.

The bishop who, in a supposed eulogy, criticized late CIA director William Casey for the Central American policy he supervised would probably have felt constrained, had Mr. Casey died of AIDS, to refrain from any mention of sodomy at the funeral. Bishops have enough sense not to flout public opinion, even (or especially) when "speaking out."

But I suspect that what the nation secretly yearns for is moral leadership that will assert norms we still believe in, however we may fall short of them — the norms we hide from the pollsters, and express mostly in our jokes.

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